

NORAD and USNORTHCOM Provide Support in Response to Columbia Disaster

Press Release

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Posted Feb 07, 2003 at 3:50:PM MDT

"The crew in the Cheyenne Mountain command center was monitoring NASAs television channel when communications broke with the space shuttle Columbia," said Maj. Barry Venable, Public Affairs Officer for the North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command. "It was clear there was a problem and the Cheyenne Mountain crew members began following emergency procedures.

Whenever the shuttle lifts off or re-enters, crews in the mountains control center are watching," said Venable. Such was the case on Feb. 1 as the space shuttle Columbia began re-entering the Earth's atmosphere.

Within minutes of NASAs emergency declaration, representatives from NORAD and USNORTHCOM inside Cheyenne Mountain Operations Center participated in a Domestic Events Conference with the Pentagons National Military Command Center, U.S. Strategic Command in Omaha, Neb., and leaders of NASA and other federal civilian agencies to discuss how to respond. This phone conference remained active throughout much of the day as emergency actions and responses were formulated. The Domestic Events Conference process is a result of the lessons learned from the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

NORAD immediately diverted two F-15s from the Louisiana Air National Guard in New Orleans, already airborne on training flights, to search the area. Two other F15s were launched later to continue the search. NORAD also launched an E-3 AWACS from Tinker AFB and two F-16s from Carswell Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base from Fort Worth, Texas to assist in search operations.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was designated the lead federal agency for search, find and security efforts. Military units initially responding did so under the authority of local commanders and existing agreements. Support included launching aircraft for search operations, providing Disaster Response Force personnel and airlifting NASA personnel to the region where the shuttle debris fell. In the initial response, the bulk of military support was provided by local National Guard units operating under state control and authority. National Guard units continue to provide the majority of military support to the search and recovery operations.

USNORTHCOM oversaw the military support provided to civil authorities. Gen. Ralph E. Eberhart, USNORTHCOM Commander, was the senior military officer participating in the Columbia accident response process and postured the command to assist NASA and FEMA as required.

With the approval of the Secretary of Defense, USNORTHCOM established a command and control structure based on the 5th Army from Fort Sam Houston, in Texas. Called Joint Task Force Columbia, this military organization is prepared to coordinate and oversee DoD support to the search, find, safeguard and recovery operations, as required, in support of the lead agency FEMA.

To date, the military has provided all support requested by FEMA. DOD support so far includes the use of Barksdale AFB, Louisiana and Carswell Naval Air Reserve Station in Ft. Worth, Texas, and the assignment of a Defense Coordinate Officer (DCO) and Defense coordinating Element (DCE) at FEMA's Disaster Field Office in Lufkin, Texas.

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Cooperative efforts between NORAD, USNORTHCOM, U.S. STRATCOM and Air Force Space Command are ongoing to assist in charting the debris field.

"On behalf of the entire NORAD and USNORTHCOM team we are deeply saddened by this tragedy, including the loss of the five U.S. servicemembers," said Mr. Michael Perini, Public Affairs Director. Our thoughts are with the families of all of the victims.